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Exploring the History of Women's Education and Activism in Thailand

LeeRay Costa

LeeRay Costa is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa. Her interests include gender, social movements, indigenous feminisms and social change in Thailand and Southeast Asia.

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Introduction

While the history of education¹ in Thailand has been a productive area of research for numerous authors, particularly in its relationship to nationalism and modernization, it remains only a partial history. For this history has primarily documented the evolution and "progress" of Thai men's education as if it could represent the experiences of Thai women as well. This is indeed not the case. In an exploratory examination of the mainstream historical literature, I found that emphasis was typically placed on the education of royal and elite men, especially in connection with the rise of the Thai bureaucracy and state centralization under the reign of King Chulalongkorn.² Thus, in many instances, women remain an undeniable absence in Thai history.³ In order to outline a tentative history of women's education to complement that of men, it was necessary to rely on sources from a number of disciplines, including education, history, anthropology, political science, economics, and population studies. A book entitled *A History of Thai Education*, published by the Thai Ministry of Education, proved to be the most sensitive to issues of gender in Thailand's educational history.⁴ That may be a result of the fact

that the majority of committee members compiling the book were Thai women: nine out of a total thirteen.⁵

What follows is a preliminary attempt to map the evolution of formal education for women in Thai society in order to discover the possible relationship that education, in particular tertiary education, has had with the development of women's political activism in the contemporary period. I intend to show that the significant gains made in tertiary education by women of various classes since the 1970's have indeed had an influence upon the heightened politicization of women and have had at least a partial role in the formation of numerous organizations and associations within civil society that have the potential, and in many cases the established goal, of instigating critical social change in the future. As history tells us, the majority of Thai women have only had access to formal education for the past seventy years. Furthermore, it has been only in the past fifteen to twenty years that women's political organizing has emerged as a significant phenomenon. Yet, there are two clearly opposing viewpoints evidenced in the literature on education in Thailand regarding its liberatory potential. Education is viewed by some authors as a disciplinary technology of nationalism that serves to mold bodies into docile manifestations of Thai national identity,⁶ while for others education is seen as a tool of empowerment and a means of resistance against larger structures of social and political authority.⁷ While both arguments are equally valid, and perhaps more provocative when held in tension, I shall argue that the latter position is more relevant to the case of Thai women in the context of their recent political efforts. I therefore begin this essay with a brief review of crucial historical moments in the development of Thailand's educational system and the resultant ramifications for women. Because much of the literature is centrist in focus (i.e., Bangkok), generalizations and comparisons about education in the provinces are more difficult to make. Nevertheless, because I am interested in women's education as a whole and its linkages to women's political participation, I do attempt to provide information on and examples from the rural countryside when possible. This opening section will be followed by a short discussion of both the oppressive and liberatory aspects of formal education in the Thai context. The contemporary situation of Thai women's political activism and organizing will then be examined, albeit briefly, in relation to the preceding discussion.

A Partial, Yet Gendered, History of Education in Thailand

Historically, formal education has been the privilege of Thai men. During the pre-modern era, two kinds of instruction existed:

1. royal institutional instruction for princes and sons of nobles (*rajpondits*) and
2. religious and family instruction in the monastery and home.

Both elite and peasant men had the opportunity to study at the local *wat* (temple) as a necessary requisite for entering the *sangha* (monkhood), a rite of passage ritually performed by the majority of Thai men. At the *wat*, men learned the sacred languages of Pali and Sanskrit in order to read Buddhist texts and perform religious chants. They also gained expertise in fields such as

astrology, medicine, poetry, and customary law. However, as women were barred from the monkhood by virtue of their sex,⁸ they were denied learning at the *wat* and, as a result, prohibited access to an enormous body of knowledge considered to be culturally and socially valuable. Women did have other bodies of knowledge relevant to their life worlds: for example, relating to the home and childrearing, the marketplace, the rice fields, and support of the *sangha*.⁹ While these bodies of knowledge were important resources for women, they were not useful in providing them with the kinds of understanding necessary to participate in the larger social and political worlds of men.¹⁰

It is also important to consider class distinctions when discussing "women" in Thailand, as they are by no means a homogenous group.¹¹ In this paper "class" refers primarily to the distinction between elites (royalty and nobility) and commoners (peasants). Since Thailand is a society characterized by social relationships of hierarchy (superior-subordinate),¹² such distinctions certainly require incorporation into the analysis. Further divisions could be made to include the merchant class (predominantly Chinese) and slaves (though slavery was gradually abolished during King Chulalongkorn's reign, 1868-1910). However, because information on these latter two groups is less substantial, only brief references will be made to them.

Because of its royalist nature, much of Thai history focuses on the Thai nobility and elite. For example, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862-1943) wrote about the education of princes and princesses during the Ayuthaya period. According to him, boys and girls studied together under the auspices of a female teacher at the Royal Palace compound from the age of three to seven.¹³ When children reached the age of seven, they were separated by gender, so that boys studied with male teachers while girls studied with female teachers. At 13, princes began to learn about Buddhism and other topics such as politics. Princesses, at the age of 11, studied morality and domestic subjects and were trained to become "refined ladies."¹⁴ It is clear that elite women *did* receive formal education in the palace, though subjects were gender specific. For example, women were taught what was considered to be culturally appropriate forms of manner and speech, as well as craft making and how to run a household.¹⁵ On the other hand, peasant women, the vast majority of women in Thailand, had virtually no opportunity to learn to read unless a male family member took the time to teach them. Whether or not particular men chose to do so is open to speculation. Sir John Bowring describes the role of Thai women in the nineteenth century as follows:

The education of Siamese women is little advanced. Many of them are good musicians, but their principal business is to attend to domestic affairs; they are frequently seen as men in charge of boats on the Meinam; they generally distribute alms to the bonzes, and attend the temples bringing their offerings of flowers and fruit. In the country they are busied with agricultural pursuits. They have seldom the art of plying the needle, as the Siamese garments almost invariably consist of a single piece of cloth.¹⁶

By the end of the nineteenth century, Thailand had entered a period of nation building which had critical consequences for education. The Thai government began to acknowledge that *wat* schools and missionary schools (which had been in existence since 1848) were no longer sufficient to meet the needs of its growing and modernizing bureaucracy.¹⁷ In order to hold the colonial powers of Britain, France, the United States, and the Netherlands at bay, Thailand had to prove both its modernity and power. A passage published by the Ministry of Education succinctly sums up the feeling of this nationalizing period: "As the politics of reform in the reign of King Chulalongkorn evidently points out, 'New Siam' requires 'Modern elites', a new generation of a progressive group to counter-balance the reluctant old one."¹⁸ At this time, three kinds of schools existed alongside traditional monastic *wat* schools: missionary schools, Chinese schools, and palace schools.¹⁹ In 1889, the Ministry of Education was established by King Chulalongkorn, organized around the previously existing Department of Public Instruction. This enactment wrested control of education from foreign missionaries and began to establish a state administered education system that could assist in nationalizing and disciplining the populace. Soon after, in 1892, King Chulalongkorn issued an edict resulting in the restructuring of the entire Thai bureaucracy and the founding of twelve ministries as components of the new government.

King Chulalongkorn commissioned Prince Wachirayan (supreme patriarch of the monks) to carry out his "Plan for the Organization of Provincial Education" in 1898. This plan invested traditional *wat* schools with a new function: to teach modern education curricula.²⁰ A centralized and uniform educational system was created with standardized textbooks, syllabi, and language (Central Thai). Undoubtedly, this attempt at homogenizing the general public was a significant step in assimilating physically, culturally, and ideologically disparate groups and placing them under the twin disciplinary regimes of monarchy and nation.²¹ These "hybrid" schools accepted only boys, as Prince Wachirayan decided to postpone addressing the education of girls until a later date.²² These boys' schools remained in operation until 1921. At that time state sponsored education became compulsory for both genders, and monks were replaced with teachers formally trained by the centralized education system. The Chinese and lesser nobility were given an opportunity for upward mobility with the founding of these new schools since they became available for attendance by different groups of men at the turn of the century. Commoner men were also increasingly recruited for ministry work and sent abroad for proper training.²³

In 1915, the government initiated another education plan attempted to give girls more educational opportunities. But prevailing cultural attitudes slowed such advancement for a number of reasons. First, the general public still believed that women should care for the home and family and that book learning was unsuitable for girls. Second, the majority of schools were located in provincial monasteries, and it was thought indecorous for women to attend school in these principally male religious spaces. Third, a shortage of teachers, especially in the provincial areas, made it even more difficult for peasant girls to receive formal education.²⁴ Charles Keyes mentions that "some women in pre-modern urban settings did become literate, but rural women were almost without exception, illiterate until after compulsory primary education was

instituted."²⁵ This occurred in 1921 when universal compulsory education, four years of primary schooling, was declared a legal requirement for both boys and girls of all classes. Between 1921 and 1925, the number of female students in Thailand rose from 7% to 38%.²⁶

The period from the 1930's to the 1970's saw considerable expansion in the educational system, although there is a lack of specific information. According to Keyes, by the 1930's the national school system was well ensconced in Thai villages, and as other evidence reveals, also in Bangkok.²⁷ But the literature reveals little about education in Thailand from the 1930's to the 1960's. It would be interesting to see the differences between male and female educational attainment during this period, as women are likely to have made significant gains based on the data we do have from the 1960's forward. During the 1960's, government control further penetrated distant villages via newly constructed highways, visual and aural media (television and radio), and a growing bureaucracy administered from the center, Bangkok. Rural areas saw thousands of primary schools built, and, by the 1970's, most children, boys and girls, completed the mandatory four years of education. A new wave of investment capital, coinciding with the Vietnam era, further infiltrated the countryside.

Tertiary education began to gain importance in Thailand during the second decade of the twentieth century, resulting in far reaching effects on Thai society and the Thai populace, both men and women. The first tertiary institution in Thailand, Chulalongkorn University, was established in 1917. Its primary purpose was to train individuals that had been educated in the new centralized school system to work for Thai government agencies. Initially, the privileges of attending university and being employed by the government were enjoyed only by men. Not until 1927 did Chulalongkorn University admit its first seven female students. Five years later, in 1932, three of them graduated with a B.A. in medicine. This was the same year that the Thai monarchy, under the reign of King Prajadhipok, was superseded by a coup instituting parliamentary democracy.²⁸ In 1932, Thai women were also granted the right to vote, only eleven years after compulsory education had been made law.²⁹

In evaluating this enactment, it is important to note that it was strategically crucial for the Thai government to educate Thai women not only to prove that Thais were "modern," capable members of the increasingly internationalized world of which they were a part, but also to discipline Thai women's minds and bodies into becoming model Thai citizens (*chaat*). Since women had (and continue to have) important roles in socializing children, the state required assurance that mothers would appropriately shape these future generations, reproducing good Thai citizens and a model social order. If women were not inculcated with the new paradigm of the Thai "geo-body," metaphorically expressed in the nation-monarchy-religion triad, they might pose a threat to state authority and the national image in the international context. Without education, women represented the "backwardness" of particular "traditional"³⁰ aspects of Thai society.³¹ While the successors of King Chulalongkorn also wanted to maintain some aspects of "traditional" Thai culture, they also wanted Siam to be considered as modern and as advanced as other European powers. On one level, based upon their long term goals to prove their progressiveness, Thai leaders had little choice in granting women formal education in

addition to other jural rights.

It is unclear from the literature whether there was either any grassroots activity among the peasants or pressure from the upper classes to commence education for women of any class. Because Thai historical literature has typically been royalist and nationalist in focus, as well as earnestly androcentric, it is often noticeably silent on the activities of the masses,³² particularly women. Thus, it is difficult to know whether there was any social activity challenging the state to provide more access to education. Likewise, it is not easy to gauge whether much group organizing among women occurred or not. The first formally recognized voluntary organization in Thailand, it is reported, was established by a group of elite women in 1885. This was the Sapa Unalom Daeng, which has since become the Thai Red Cross.³³ Darunee and Pandey cite a "brief emergence of 'new enthusiasm'" among highly educated middle class women prior to the overthrow in 1932.³⁴ There was some discussion in women's magazines and newspapers concerning the desire to attain equal rights with men. But women's organizations do not seem to emerge until after the 1932 revolution. Nonetheless, although Darunee and Pandey state that some elite women's groups were established after the democratic era of 1932, they do not provide many examples.³⁵

Higher education continued to expand from the 1960's onward. With a growing emphasis on regional development within Thailand, the first regional university was opened in Chiang Mai in 1960. The Private College Act, which allowed for the foundation of private colleges and universities, was passed in 1969. In 1971, Ramkhamhaeng University, the first "open" university in Thailand, was founded. This meant that many more Thais, regardless of class position, could attain a university level education provided they could afford to purchase books and live in Bangkok. A statistical chart provided by Wyatt demonstrates that from 1937 to 1947 there was a 25.2% increase in women's literacy, a 20.9% increase by 1960, and a 13.8% increase by 1970, bringing women's literacy to 74.8%.³⁶

Not surprisingly, the period from the 1970's to the present has seen the greatest improvement in women's education as well as women's rights in general. Between 1961 and 1972, the number of Thai universities expanded from five to seventeen, and student enrollment increased from 15,000 to 100,000.³⁷ Until 1972, tertiary education was still focused upon preparing individuals, primarily men, for civil service. But, after 1972, the civil service was saturated, and the need for bureaucrats declined, channeling Thais into other careers, especially in the rapidly developing export-oriented market economy. For the first time in history, a larger number of university students came from small towns of lower-middle class status. This may partially have been a result of the time lag as primary schools gradually became firmly established in the rural countryside. As the number of rural peasant students increased in the university, the atmosphere began to change, and students increasingly met to discuss social and political issues. It was precisely at this time that left-wing literature and political organizations were banned by the government.³⁸ Students began challenging the government curricula³⁹ and questioning many assumptions about their society.⁴⁰ The 1973 student foment culminated in an unprecedented revolution on October 14.

The new found optimism generated by the students and their success led to many changes in the university system as well as larger bureaucratic and jural structures. This included the production of a new constitution, passed in 1974, that guaranteed equality between men and women and legislated the revision of all discriminatory laws.⁴¹ However, just as the political sphere finally appeared to be opening up to a broader range of voices in Thailand, the spirit of democracy embodied in thousands of students protesting throughout the country was violently crushed by the right wing military on October 6, 1976-a day now enshrined in the memories of Thai people as *hok tulaa* (the sixth of October).⁴² Many of the reforms were later reversed, but the universities remained a place where students could gather and discuss political issues, though perhaps more cautiously.

The 1990 census indicated that the historical gender gap between men and women in educational attainment had finally closed at all levels. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that, since 1980, the number of women attaining a tertiary education has surpassed that of men.⁴³ This is but one of the consequences of the increase in compulsory education for both genders from four years to six in 1978 and six to nine years in 1994.⁴⁴ The longer students remain in primary and secondary school, the more likely they are to continue on to higher education. Between 1970 and 1991, the number of tertiary educated people in the work force multiplied ten times⁴⁵ giving rise to what is now generally recognized as a Thai "middle class."⁴⁶ Knodel argues that this reversal in educational attainment on the part of women reflects differences in the socialization of gender roles in society, where boys and men are granted far more freedom and social mobility than women, and women are viewed as the loci of responsibility and stability. Women are assumed to be better disciplined and more focused on their studies and thus more likely to succeed.

This points to a number of underlying gender differentiated cultural attitudes that could perhaps be traced back through the pre-modern era, as some historical sources suggest.⁴⁷ Various studies of male/female family remittances regularly demonstrate that women send more money home than men and Knodel cites the 1986 national survey as confirming this fact.⁴⁸ In the end, the education of daughters may result in a better "pay off" for parents than the education of sons, argues Knodel, especially if the daughter remains single, as she will be more likely to send money home. Since the censuses report a clear trend toward later marriage by women, this may in fact be the case.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it is now generally assumed by the Thai populace, rural and urban, that higher education is a guarantee of better employment opportunities and, hence, upward social mobility.

More current census data confirms the feminization of tertiary education in Thailand (both as students and teachers) and the prevalence of women in all tertiary institutions except vocational schools.⁵⁰ Will the status of educational employment be lowered as a result of the field's feminization as appears to have been the case in the United States? Are academic subjects in Thailand stereotypically dichotimized into male "hard" and female "soft" subjects? Contrary to

popular assumptions, this does not appear to be the case in Thailand. However, while these are important questions, this is not the direction in which I would like to take the present discussion. More interesting, I argue, are the potential effects women's newly acquired education might have on Thai society in the future. In particular, might this new knowledge and awareness result in the increased politicization of women and the growth of voluntary associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)? I take up these issues in the remainder of the paper.

Education: Nationalist Discipline or Political Empowerment?

As mentioned in the introduction, education is one of the most efficient disciplinary techniques of the nation-state. Through centralized curriculum development and teacher training administered from the capital, those in power can mold individuals into citizens of the new nation-state, constituting an "imagined community."⁵¹ Whether or not this happened in Thailand is not at issue here. Charles Keyes and Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, among others, make persuasive arguments in this regard.⁵² Keyes states that the crucial role of national schools was "preparing villagers to accept a subordinate position in the centralized bureaucratic world of the Thai nation-state,"⁵³ while Chayan similarly argues that rural schools prepare "village children to be agents of production as well as members of their national community."⁵⁴ Thus, in their liberal haste to interpret compulsory education as a human right and necessary path to upward mobility, some Western scholars and Thai activists may have underestimated the possibility that such education was *also* utilized to keep certain classes of Thai individuals in their place-"to accept existing social contradictions and inequalities"⁵⁵ -: to maintain, as it were, the social hierarchy. Keyes argues that the "spatial culture" of the school serves as a "model of the state" on a smaller scale, one to which villagers can relate in their everyday lives. It teaches peasants how to interact with government officials and prepares them for smooth entry into the burgeoning capitalist economy. As such, the Thai school may be best termed, in Foucault's words, a "technology of the body."⁵⁶ Indeed, Chayan states categorically that national schools "produce docile, submissive and loyal citizens who accept the legitimacy of the social order."⁵⁷ These bodies are the micro-targets of a national power that is both pervasive and intense, as well as productive. In many instances, schoolteachers, already embodiments of national discourse, were the first central government officials to enter rural locations.⁵⁸ They brought with them new sources of knowledge and power that not only challenged local knowledge but identified state and "modern" knowledge as superior.⁵⁹ Thus, the teacher has played and perhaps continues to play an important role in orienting villagers properly towards the state.⁶⁰

However, this view suggests that teachers, as well as students, were, and are, completely passive tools of the state, empty vessels into which nationalist doctrine was poured and from which it was then reproduced. Such an interpretation removes any agency these teachers may have had and effaces any differences of opinion voiced by teachers or students to each other and to the wider community. While national discourses and structures of power in the form of education may constrain individual agency, they may also be a source of creation and imagination. In fact, many times only a few key individuals are necessary to begin the questioning of dominant

discourses and/or structures of power and to persuasively convey their doubts and challenges to a wider community. Education, I assert, may indeed provide those tools of challenge by showing people alternatives and expanding their conceptual and practical horizons.

This raises a more critical question about school teachers. Women have virtually taken over the field of education in Thailand at all levels. We might ask if this is because women are more easily inculcated with nationalist doctrine. For example, do women conform to nation-state expectations in a different and more comprehensive way than men? And, if so, how? Does women's entry into the field of education represent an attempt by women to enter a previously male dominated and privileged position? If women enter the teaching profession merely to reproduce nationalist policies, images, and identities, are they not in fact contributing to their own subordination and discipline in a kind of "false consciousness"? On the other hand, what if teachers, male and female, are actually turning some of that same power of the state against itself through processes of subversion? What sorts of everyday resistance might be occurring at the micro level that are not so easily observed?⁶¹ It would be interesting to examine some of the tactics teachers use inside and outside of the classroom in order to see if and how those tactics actually intervene and subvert nationalist ideologies in any way.⁶² Again, this raises more questions than I am prepared to address in this short essay. Nevertheless, I raise them in order to suggest some of the more positive potential possibilities of education. In other words, can education make women into able activists rather than merely compliant members of the nation-state?

In addition to being a tool of nationalism, education may be conversely and yet simultaneously viewed as one of the most powerful tools for individual and community empowerment. Researchers in various disciplines have identified a clear link between education, literacy, and women's social status: the higher one's educational and literacy level, the higher one's social status. Relatedly, Keyes draws on Bourdieu's concept of cultural or symbolic capital in his discussion of education and its links to status in rural Thai villages.⁶³ Keyes states, "Literacy is always associated with a social division of knowledge that, in turn, contributes as much to the structuring of the realm of social relations as does the social division in the ownership of the means of production."⁶⁴ Due to his larger interest in class difference, Keyes pays less attention to the gendered nature of symbolic capital. However, he does note that women have a complementary symbolic capital related to the domestic arena, marketing, as well as in their supportive role of the *sangha*:⁶⁵ a "separate but equal" type of argument. This of course sidesteps the possibility that such a division might operate to keep women in an inferior social position relative to men.⁶⁶ Yet it does appear quite obvious that peasant and, perhaps, merchant women were excluded from attaining the symbolic capital of literacy and formal education until the mid twentieth century, several generations after peasant men.

Keyes, referring specifically to Southeast Asian villages, states that "one of the striking changes in social structure that has come about with the introduction of compulsory education has been that females as well as males have been given access to schooling" which has allowed women to "visualize a world very different from that known by their grandmothers."⁶⁷ With more

education, a higher level of literacy, and the exposure to new ideas and new worlds, women's horizons have been broadened and their interests piqued. Likewise, female school teachers provide new and different role models for village girls and point to possibilities beyond the home and village.⁶⁸ Suteera and Maytinee note that because women play key roles in educating and socializing children (particularly in school and the family unit), they are crucial "social change agents" and contributors to development in Thailand. They argue that, when women understand their equality with men and their important roles in society, they will pass these beliefs on to their children, thus altering "backward social values and traditions."⁶⁹

It has only been in the past twenty years that women outside of the elite class could be said to have attained the knowledge and symbolic capital necessary for entry into certain realms of civil society such as politics. It is thus not surprising to find that the emergence of women's voluntary associations and NGOs and the slow ingress of women into the formal political sphere has occurred only in the recent past. What *is* surprising is that significant changes have occurred so rapidly and in such a short period of time—the last fifteen to twenty years—and that women now play crucial and visible roles in welfare and political organizations agitating for change.

Women's Political Activism in the Contemporary Period

While it is perhaps common knowledge among scholars of Thailand that Thai women have long been relatively absent from formal politics,⁷⁰ it is far less acknowledged that women currently play prominent roles in NGOs and other informal arenas of power and decision making. Consequently, I see these developments in women's formal and informal political activism as inextricably tied to the gains made in educational attainment over the past seventy years. I turn now to a few of these developments. Due to the exploratory nature of this paper, the discussion is regrettably a cursory one. Nonetheless, I do believe it will provide another way to view recent changes in Thailand's civil society.

Suteera and Maytinee argue that the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) was crucial in making women more visible in Thai society.⁷¹ Members of NGOs, many women's groups, and even the government participated in various events promoting the status of women. The 1980's and 90's have seen an explosion of NGOs, with three hundred and seventy-five NGOs formally registered in 1990.⁷² The enthusiasm among women's groups was most recently bolstered by the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women and the preceding NGO forum in Beijing, China. A number of Thai NGOs and smaller grass-roots organizations attended, along with several Thai academics. Thus, during a preliminary research trip in October 1996, many NGO members with whom I spoke were still reveling in the energy stirred up by the Beijing conference and subsequent events organized within Thailand.

Some of the larger and more visible Thai women's NGOs include the Foundation for Women, Friends of Women, Gender Watch, EMPOWER, and the Gender Development and Research Institute. These groups are progressive and emancipatory in that they are working towards structural change. Their activities include, but are not limited to, the following: developing

media and educational resources for women's consciousness raising, monitoring images of women in all forms of public media, offering health services to prostitutes and the poor, teaching women new and practical skills, providing shelters for battered women, incorporating women's rights into the constitution, and providing conferences and programs for leadership training. Other women's organizations which are more conservative in approach include the National Council of Women in Thailand, the Girl Guides Association of Thailand, and the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women. Additionally, smaller women's organizations and grass-roots groups, whose memberships range in size from one to thousands, exist throughout the country.

These developments in social and political activism have occurred together with an increase in tertiary education for the Thai populace and the slow but steady entrance of women into formal politics. Over the past fifteen years, the number of men and women attending university have surged, with many Thais taking the opportunity to be educated abroad.⁷³ In fact, many of the leaders of women's NGOs are women with higher degrees (M.A.s and B.A.s), and often they are also of a higher class than the target population of their organizations' programs. Leaders typically have the resources-educational, financial, and social-to initiate organizations and activities and, frequently, the charismatic personality necessary to rally others to action. Meetings with NGO leaders and members in Thailand in October 1996 revealed both a highly educated NGO network and a few key individuals who were well-recognized and avidly admired. The importance of tertiary education cannot be underplayed. Most of the younger women at the few organizations I visited noted that they had become politicized during their university years, while several of the older women had actively participated in the 1970's student movement during their university years.

Women's gains in formal politics have unfortunately been less pronounced than their gains in education, yet there have been some key developments. For example, in 1993, two female governors were appointed for the first time in the nation's history, and, in 1995, 15% of the nation's judges were women. The Constitution promulgated in February 1995 enshrined women's rights.⁷⁴ Although women's participation in the formal political arena remains extremely low relative to men, with approximately 4% of the decision-making positions at the national level filled by women and only 6% at the local level,⁷⁵ women's participation in the informal arena as campaign organizers and supporters, NGO members, and voters has increased.⁷⁶ According to Suteera, 300,000 more women than men voted in the 1992 election. She boldly asserts that "Thai women may be more updated and knowledgeable about politics than men."⁷⁷ The 1996 election saw a number of women running for office, although none were considered for the role of Prime Minister. Currently, the composition of the House is 5.6% female. Notably, the female Ministers of Parliament, when considered relative to men, consistently have a higher level of education than their male counterparts.⁷⁸

The 1990's have seen a general societal acceptance of and perhaps even a growing dependence upon voluntary organizations to agitate for their interests.⁷⁹ Even Thai academics are discussing the significance NGOs have for future social change.⁸⁰ That it took as long as it did for some of

these groups to establish themselves is partially a result of the hostile environment the frequently authoritarian Thai government fostered toward any groups not towing the official party line, especially following the October 6 events.⁸¹ Yet, as I have endeavored to show here, these developments are also related to the advances made in women's educational opportunities during the past seventy years, from 1927 to 1997. As education has become increasingly accessible for both men and women of all classes, the boundaries of what is "possible" have expanded and blurred, opening doors to new opportunities and profound challenges.

Conclusion

Based upon this brief exploration into the history of education in Thailand, it appears quite clear that Thai women's activism, especially among non-elite women, did not appear until after education became not merely a right for women but firmly entrenched even in remote villages. The increase in women's activism seems closely tied to women's attainment of tertiary levels of education, both undergraduate and graduate. This is not surprising. However, the issues regarding education as both a tool of nationalism and a tool of empowerment are not so easily addressed. What I have tried to suggest is that, as much as education can be interpreted as the handmaiden of nationalist discipline, it can also be understood as an empowering process that has the potential to politicize the populace. Whether or not women's education has had negative effects on their aspirations to political participation and improved status is still open to debate. The tensions between tradition and modernity are complex and function within multiple and shifting fields of power at the local, national, and international levels. "Progress" and modernity, as has been well demonstrated in many nations of the world, can have detrimental as well as positive results, and, in this respect, differences of class, ethnicity, and region among women require further attention. As more Thai women attain higher degrees and knowledge of local and national problems and transnational issues that affect women differentially in all classes and societies, they may further contribute to the grass-roots activism occurring in Thailand and the larger Southeast Asian region.

Notes

1 In the context of this paper "education" is generally defined in a formal sense and refers to learning in a structured and institutionalized context such as that typically found in state sponsored schools and monastery schools. In these kinds of contexts education usually occurs as a process of transmission of knowledge and information from an instructor to one or more students. When I refer to other types of more informal education (e.g., in the home or other social spaces), it shall be noted for the reader.

2 See, for example, Wyatt's discussion of "boys" and "men." David K. Wyatt, "Education and the Modernization of Thai Society," in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp*, ed. G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (Ithaca: Cornell University

Press, 1975).

3 See Reynold's crucial article which discusses the neglect of gender relations in studies of the Thai past. Craig J. Reynolds, "Predicaments of Modern Thai History," *South East Asia Research* 2, no. 1 (1993): 64-90.

4 Ministry of Education, *A History of Thai Education* (Bangkok: Kurusapha Ladprao Press, 1976).

5 Ministry of Education, *History*, ii, lists the participants' names.

6 Charles F. Keyes, "The Proposed World of the School," in *Reshaping Local Worlds: Formal Education and Cultural Change in Rural Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Keyes, Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies Monograph Series, no. 36 (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1991); Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995).

7 Suteera Thomson and Maytinee Bhongsvej, *Women Reshaping the Society: A Challenge for the Remaining Decade* (Bangkok: Gender & Development Research Institute, 1995); Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1966).

8 In this text the term "sex" is used to refer to a socially and culturally determined biological category based on physical (gonadal) attributes. Similarly, "gender" is a category that refers to the ways in which societies and cultures organize people into groups of male and female and attribute specific meanings to those categories. However, following Ginsburg and Tsing, I do not see gender as fixed but as constantly negotiated in social life. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Tsing, *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 2.

9 For example, Reid argues for women's "domestic literacy" in Southeast Asia in the pre-modern period. Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, vol. 1, *The Lands below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

10 See Darunee and Pandey for a more strident critique of patriarchy in this regard. Darunee Tantiwiranond and Shashi Pandey, "The Status and Role of Thai Women in the Pre-Modern Period: A Historical and Cultural Perspective," *Sojourn* 2, no. 1 (1987): 124-149, 131.

11 As many feminist theorists have pointed out, "woman" is never a homogenous category. It is always differentiated by class, ethnicity, race, region, religion, and sexuality. Such arguments have been effectively made by women of color in the United States and postcolonial feminists in the developing world. See for example: bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Cherri Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *This Bridge Called*

My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983); Chandra T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed., Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Karen Sacks, "Toward a Unified Theory of Class, Race and Gender," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 3 (1989): 534-50. However, in the case of education in Thailand, I maintain that class remains the most salient category in differentiating amongst groups of women. While other categories of difference may contribute to further explicating the problem, such categories are not always easy to distinguish in the literature. Thus, they will not be addressed herein.

12 There has been some debate over whether Thailand may in fact be defined as a society characterized by patron-client ties and/or clientelism. See, for example, Clark D. Neher, "Political Interaction in Northern Thailand," *Crossroads* 4, no. 2 (1989): 35-52. Fishel provides a more current interrogation of the patron-client model. Thamora Fishel, "Mothers, Teachers and *Hua Kanaen*: Gender and the Culture of Local Politics in Thailand," Paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Thai Studies, Chiang Mai, Thailand. October 14-17, 1996.

13 Anna Leonowens is probably the most famous, albeit controversial, of such female teachers. See David K. Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 163fn.

14 Ministry of Education, *History*, 9.

15 The Thai Ministry of Education's history of Thai education notes that Nang Revadi Nopamas, a court lady who lived during the Sukhothai period, wrote Nopamas' Story. It points out that this reveals that girl's education was not confined to home crafts but also included literacy and literary skill. However, the authors fail to tell us how Nang Revadi received such skills. Are we to assume that all court ladies were literate? That only those interested in reading were literate? Or that Nang Revadi gained such knowledge by other means? This is an issue that begs further research. Ministry of Education, *History*, 1. See also Reid for more on women's literacy in the pre-modern period. Reid, *Southeast Asia*, 216-222.

16 Ministry of Education, *History*, 4.

17 Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform*; Wyatt, "Education and the Modernization"; David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

18 Ministry of Education, *History*, 22.

19 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 1991.

20 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 1991.

21 See Streckfuss's engaging discussion of race and ethnicity in Thailand and the creative construction of Thai citizens (*chaat*) during this period. David Streckfuss, "The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai Racialist Thought," in *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honor of John R.W. Smail*, ed. Laurie J. Sears University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies Monograph Series, no. 11 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph no. 11, 1993), 123-53.

22 Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform*, 327.

23 Wyatt, *Thailand*, 219.

24 Ministry of Education, *History*, 36.

25 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 123.

26 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 94. The Thai Ministry of Education does report a number of educational institutions for girls prior to 1921. In 1874, the first boarding school for girls, Kulasatri Wanglang, was established by Miss Harriet M. House (an American). In 1880, King Chulalongkorn established a second boarding school in Bangkok, called Sunandalai School, in honor of his consort, Princess Sunanda Kumariratana. Queen Sribajarindra established the Saowabha School for girls in 1897 and in 1907 a women's teacher training program was organized at the Satri Widya School to train women as primary school teachers. The year 1913 saw the establishment of Benchama Rajali School for teacher training. However, it is unclear which women were allowed to attend these schools and how many actually did so. I assume these schools were set up primarily for elite women, though this requires further investigation. Ministry of Education, *History*.

27 Keyes, "The Proposed World."

28 See Benjamin Batson for one perspective on the 1932 overthrow of the Siamese monarchy. Batson also discusses Prajadhipokh's contributions to developing the education system. Benjamin Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, Southeast Asia Publication series, no. 10 (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), 77-78.

29 Because women received the vote so soon after receiving the right to education, it is no surprise that generally women were not very active in formal politics during this period (1930's). Without literacy and knowledge of "modern" concerns, it would be difficult especially for peasant women to understand the formal politics of the emergent nation-state. On the other hand, experience begets other kinds of knowledge relevant to political decision-making. I would surmise that, during this period, only elite women took advantage of the franchise, as they clearly had more education, were highly literate, and had access to affairs of state via their spatial proximity and their male family members.

30 By placing the term "traditional" in quotation marks I seek to reference the now quite substantial body of literature that has interrogated the concept of "tradition", arguing that tradition is always constructed in the present for political and practical reasons. See for example: Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, "Tradition: Genuine or Spurious?", *Journal of American Folklore* 97 (1984): 273-90. For a recent analysis of "tradition" in the Thai context see Rosalind C. Morris, "Crises of the Modern, Memories of the Vanished: Ritual, Tradition and the New Value of Pastness in Northern Thailand." Paper presented at the Sixth International Thai Studies Conference, Chiang Mai, Thailand. October 14-17, 1996.

31 According to Vella, King Vajiravudh believed that the status of women in a society was a symbol of that society's degree of civilization. Thus, he instituted a number of reforms during his reign (1910-1925) that he thought would improve Thai women's status, especially education. What may seem more superficial included changes in women's fashions. Women were encouraged to grow out their short hair and to cease chewing betel nut. Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1978): 151-167.

32 See enlightening arguments made by Reynolds and Thongchai in this regard. Craig J. Reynolds, "The Plot of Thai History: Theory and Practice," in *Patterns and Illusions: Thai History and Thought*, ed. Gehan Wijeyewardene and E.C. Chapman (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992); Thongchai Winichakul, "The Changing Landscape of the Past: New Histories in Thailand since 1973." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1995): 99-120.

33 Amara Pongsapich and Nitaya Kataleeradabhan, *Philanthropy, NGO Activities and Corporate Funding in Thailand* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1994), 23.

34 Darunee and Pandey, *By Women*, 27; see also Reynolds, "Predicaments," 66-7.

35 Darunee and Pandey, *By Women*, 5, 26-7.

36 Wyatt, *Thailand*, 291.

37 Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand: Economy*, 301.

38 Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand: Economy*, 301.

39 Thongchai, "Changing," 110.

40 At the same time, popular based movements around the world were emerging. In Malaysia and Indonesia the *dakwaha* movement made its appearance, while the Philippines saw the

declaration of martial law in 1972, giving rise to underground movements and liberation theology. In the United States, the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations continued, and civil rights and women's movements also gained momentum.

41 Juree Vichit-Vadakan, "Women in Politics in Thailand," in *Women in Politics: Australia, India, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand*, ed. Latika Padgaonkar, Social and Human Sciences in Asia and Pacific, RUSHCAP Series on Monographs and Occasional Papers, 36 (Bangkok: UNESCO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 1993).

42 For further discussion of the Thai student movement and the turbulent period of the 1970's see David K. Wyatt, *Thailand*, 299-303; Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand: Economy*, 304-314. The year 1996 marked the twenty year anniversary of *hok tulaa*, and was commemorated both in Bangkok and universities throughout Thailand. The commemoration also resulted in a number of Thai books about the events and their remembering. See for example Chavalit Winichakul, ed., *Rao Kheu Phu Borisut (We the Innocents)* (Bangkok: Khana Kammakaan Prasan Ngan Yii Sip Pii Hok Dulaa, 1996); Anusorn Yuwasut et al, *Tulaakaan (The Time of October)* (Bangkok: Khana Kammakaan Prasan Ngan Yii Sip Pii Hok Dulaa, 1996). For a non-Thai viewpoint on the commemoration, see Bryce Beemer, "Bangkok Postcard: Forgetting and Remembering 'Hok Tulaa,' the October 6 Massacre," *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies* 1, no 1 (1996): 69-76.

43 John Knodel, *Gender and Schooling in Thailand*, Research Division Working Papers, no. 60 (New York: The Population Council, 1994), 9.

44 See Suteera Thomson and Maytinee Bhongsvej, *Women Reshaping the Society: A Challenge for the Remaining Decade* (Bangkok: Gender and Development Research Institute, 1995), 18-19.

45 Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand: Economy*, 368.

46 The "middle class" remains an ambiguous category in Thai studies that many scholars seem reluctant (or perhaps unable) to define. See application of the term by Peter F. Bell, "Gender and Economic Development in Thailand," in *Gender and Development in Southeast Asia*, ed. Penny and John Van Esterik (CCEAS XX, Vol. II, 1992); Edwin Zehner, "Reform Symbolism of a Thai Middle-Class Sect: The Growth and Appeal of the Thammakai Movement," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21, no. 2 (1990): 402-426; Christina Blanc-Szanton, "Gender and Intergenerational Resource Allocations: Thai and Sino-Thai Households in Central Thailand," in *Structures and Strategies: Women, Work and Family in Asia*, ed. Leela Dube and Fajni Palriwala (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990). For an attempt by Thai scholars to further discipline the category, see Sungsidh Piriyanangsan and Pasuk Phongpaichit, ed., *The Middle Class and Thai Democracy* (Bangkok: The Political Economy Centre Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1993).

47 See for example, Darunee and Pandey, "The Status," 141. For further discussion of cultural attitudes and practices concerning women in particular, see the following works: Mary Beth Mills, "Modernity and Gender Vulnerability: Rural women working in Bangkok," in *Gender and*

Development in Southeast Asia, ed. Penny and John Van Esterik, CCSEAS, York University, Oct. 28-20); Marjorie Muecke, "Mother Sold Food, Daughter Sells Her Body, The Cultural Continuity of Prostitution," *Social Scientific Medicine* 35, no 7 (1992): 891-901; Khin Thitsa, *Providence and Prostitution: Image and Reality for Women in Buddhist Thailand* (London: Change, 1980); Pasuk Phongpaichit, *From Peasant Girls*.

48 Knodel, *Gender and Schooling*, 29; see also Pasuk, *From Peasant Girls*.

49 The 1980 census reported that 44% of women aged 20-24 were not married, while the 1990 census reported that 49% of women aged 20-24 were not married. Knodel, *Gender and Schooling*, 43. Yet Knodel also presents contradictory evidence in this matter. He notes that the cultural belief that daughters are the appropriate caretakers of elderly parents is one reason given by parents for their decision to give *boys* a higher education rather than girls, especially in the northern and northeastern regions. Knodel, *Gender and Schooling*, 28.

50 At the tertiary level, women comprise 58% of general university students, 66% of teacher's college students, and 91% of graduate nursing students. They comprise only 45% of vocational students as reported in the 1989-90 Thai census. Knodel, *Gender and Schooling*, 15.

51 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

52 Keyes, "The Proposed World"; Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, "Social and Ideological Reproduction in Rural Northern Thai Schools," in *Reshaping Local Worlds: Formal Education and Cultural Change in Rural Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Keyes Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies Monograph Series, no. 36 (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1991). See also Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

53 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 89.

54 Chayan, "Social and Ideological," 153.

55 Chayan, "Social and Ideological," 154.

56 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). It should be noted that the arguments by Keyes and Chayan draw heavily on concepts generally associated with the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, though neither of them cite him in the body of their works, or in their bibliographies.

57 Chayan, "Social and Ideological," 165.

58 Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand: Economy*, 75.

59 See Gesick for one example in the case of Thai history for how local knowledges and discourses are decentered and superseded by the knowledge and discursive practices of the nation-state. She demonstrates how this occurred in the case of stories and legends surrounding Lady White Blood in southern Thailand. Lorraine M. Gesick, *In the Land of Lady White Blood: Southern Thailand and the Meaning of History*, Studies on Southeast Asia, no. 18 (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995).

60 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 103.

61 What I am thinking of here can be found in Vandergeest's excellent interpretation of how Thai peasants appropriated discourses of the state (including that of science, natural causality, progress, and law) and utilized them to undermine the state's hegemony from within. Peter Vandergeest, "Constructing Thailand: Regulation, Everyday Resistance, and Citizenship," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 1 (1993):133-158.

62 The notion of "tactics" is borrowed from de Certeau. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). To what extent teachers actually follow centralized plans of instruction is open to debate. In my experience as a teacher in Thailand (1989-90), I was allowed to use any material I selected in class instruction. No rules were imposed upon me from local or central administration. However, the fact that I was a foreign teacher is likely to have been a crucial factor in this relative freedom. I am unsure if my Thai colleagues ever utilized materials and lessons not sanctioned by the state. This would be a provocative topic for future ethnographic research.

63 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

64 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 93.

65 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 94. See also Charles F. Keyes, "Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Culture of Gender and Rural Women in Buddhist Thailand," *American Anthropologist* 11, no. 2 (1984): 223-41; Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986).

66 This is the thrust of Darunee and Pandey's argument. Darunee and Pandey, "The Status."

67 Keyes, "The Proposed World", 11; see also Mary Beth Mills, "'We are not like our mothers': Migrants, Modernity and Identity in Northeast Thailand" (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1993).

68 Keyes, "The Proposed World," 11.

69 Suteera and Maytinee, *Women Reshaping*, 6. It should be noted that, while I agree with Suteera and Maytinee's goals, I take umbrage at their indelicate choice of words.

70 This point has been made in regard to Thailand by a number of authors. See A. Thomas Kirsch, "Economy, Polity and Religion in Thailand," in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*, ed. G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Jack M. Potter, *Thai Peasant Social Structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Juree Vichit-Vadakan, *Women in Politics*.

71 Suteera and Maytinee, *Women Reshaping*.

72 *Directory of Public Interest Non-Government Organizations in Thailand*. (Bangkok: Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, Social Research Institute Chiang Mai University, Research and Development Institute Khon Kaen University, 1990). I would imagine the numbers have increased in the past six years.

73 By 1990 it was documented that 91.3% of women were literate and 94.7% of men. Suteera and Maytinee, *Women Reshaping*, 16.

74 The year 1974 was the first time that women's rights were explicitly guaranteed in the national constitution, partly as a result of the Thai Student Movement of 1973-1976. However, this victory was short lived as Thailand fell back into despotic hands in 1976. Over the past twenty years, equal rights have continued to be elaborated in successive versions of the Thai constitution. It will be interesting to see if and how women's rights are incorporated into the constitution currently being drafted.

75 Suteera and Maytinee, *Women Reshaping*, 3.

76 For one example, see Fishel on the participation of women as supporters of male political campaigns. Fishel, *Mothers, Teachers*.

77 Suteera and Maytinee, *Women Reshaping*, 3.

78 Which only proves that women still have to be more highly educated and work harder than men. Sanitsuda Ekachai, "Women MPs Need all the Help," *Bangkok Post*, 21 November 1996.

79 In December 1996, *Asiaweek* published an issue whose headline was: "Activist Power: From Miss World to APEC, Pressure Groups Keep Governments on Edge," focusing on the importance of NGOs as a force for social and political change. *Asiaweek* 6 December 1996. Similar country specific articles focusing on the Southeast Asian region have also appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* during the last few years.

80 Thai NGO Support Project, *Thai NGOs: The Continuing Struggle for Democracy* (Bangkok: Edison Press, 1995).

81 See discussions by Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand: Economy*; Amara and Nitaya, *Philosophy*.